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Citation for published version:

Colliander, J, Marder, B, Falkman, LL, Madestam, J, Modig, E & Sagfossen, S 2017, 'The social media balancing act: Testing the use of a balanced self-presentation strategy for politicians using Twitter', *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 74, pp. 277- 285. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.04.042>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1016/j.chb.2017.04.042](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.04.042)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Computers in Human Behavior

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The Social Media Balancing Act: Testing the Use of a Balanced Self-Presentation Strategy for Politicians Using Twitter

Abstract

Politicians' clear separation between their professional and private lives has been challenged by a growing need to be seen as personable, especially on social media where this is the norm. Little, however, is known about the effect on a political party when its politicians reveal aspects of their private lives on social media. The present study addresses this question. Through the lens of self-presentation theory, we are the first to test the effect of a balanced presentation strategy on Twitter (i.e., tweets that involve both professional and private aspects of their lives) as opposed to a strictly professional one. A longitudinal design was adopted with 265 Twitter users as participants. The results showed that a balanced strategy increased both interest in the politician's party and intention to vote for that party, irrespective of a user's political interest, social media usage intensity, or age, or the gender of either the user or the communicating politician. Furthermore, liking the tweets emerged as a crucial mediator. This study contributes valuable knowledge on self-presentation strategies of politicians specifically, and more broadly regarding self-presentation in the face of context collapse. However we call for future research to validate our experimental findings in a real-life setting. Implications are provided for political parties and others.

Introduction

Social media technologies, especially Twitter, have revolutionized modern politics, rapidly drawing the attention of academics (Baek, 2015; Coffey, Kohler, & Granger, 2015; Wasike, 2017; Yu, 2016). Twitter is used by partisans across the political spectrum to perform postmortems after televised debates (Heller, 2016), from which analysts gauge the overall sentiment of the electorate (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welpe., 2010). Politicians tweet to garner support from potential voters and to engage with their rivals (Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2016). However, what politicians tweet can be subject to heavy scrutiny. For example, *Fortune* magazine reported that in the months prior to the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump had found “someone new to insult on Twitter every 42 hours” (Shen, 2016). As political parties begin to prepare social media guidance documents for their politicians (Mason, 2015), a crucial question emerges: how should their politicians present themselves through such technologies?

On traditional media, politicians presented strictly their professional persona with rare deviation. However, on social media, politicians are starting to present aspects of their personal lives (Kruikemeier, 2014). Politicians are now faced with a self-presentational tug-of-war between their need to maintain a professional persona, on one hand, and on the other hand a growing pressure to display their private persona as a means to increase intimacy with their electorate (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; van Aelst et al., 2011; van Zoonen, 2000). Social media place heavy pressure on politicians to reveal aspects of their lives, as it is a crucial emerging technology for political messages (Marder, Slade, Houghton and

Archer-Brown, 2016a) and an arena where the norm of communication is personal, “lightweight” (Zhao & Rosson, 2009, p. 243) and “phatic” (Miller, 2008, p. 387). Furthermore, Twitter like other forms of social media is characterized by context collapse, meaning that multiple contexts (e.g., work and home) are intermeshed into one self-presentation arena, thus “bringing together commonly distinct audiences” (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 115). Thus far, however, only two studies have examined the efficacy of politicians’ professional versus private communications on social media. Lee and Oh, (2012) found that for politicians revealing aspects of one’s private life on social media had ambiguous effects on the viewer’s intention to vote due to confounding variables. Kruikemeier, (2014), report the finding that “surprisingly” private life disclosures have no impact on intention to vote (p.135). Although these studies provided useful initial insights their results are inconclusive. The authors of both papers call for further research to examine the impact of politicians’ professional versus private disclosures on social media. Our aim is to address this gap.

To contribute to understanding in this area, we adopt self-presentation as our theoretical lens, consistent with other research in the field (Bareket-Bojmel, Moran, & Shahr, 2016; Baumgartner et al., 2015; Marder, Joinson, Shankar and Thirlaway 2016b). In particular, we draw from Goffman’s (1978) distinction between front-stage (professional) and back-stage (private) presentation. Furthermore, we build upon Marwick and Boyd’s (2011) seminal qualitative exploration of Twitter micro-celebrities (i.e., people with 100,000 or more followers). In this study, Marwick and Boyd found evidence of self-presentational “balancing” in the presence of context collapse (p. 124). Such balancing occurs

when users with a large and diverse base of followers strategically include aspects of both their professional and private personas in their tweets. Although this strategy has been well acknowledged and widely cited (see Papacharissi, 2012; Vitak et al., 2015), its effects have not been empirically tested. We thus aim to contribute to knowledge on how politicians should present themselves through social media and, more broadly, to self-presentation in the presence of context collapse. To achieve this purpose, we employ a longitudinal experiment to test the effect of balancing front-stage and back-stage presentation, as compared to strictly professional communication content, on two desired outcomes for the politician's party (interest in the political party and intention to vote for the party).

Background

Self-Presentation

Erving Goffman first introduced the theory of self-presentation in his seminal book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1978). From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, Goffman discussed how people present themselves to others through a dramaturgical metaphor. People are actors on a stage, driven to instill a desired impression in the audience members' minds. On stage, actors utilize both verbal and nonverbal cues, adapting what they say, their tone of voice, whom they stand with, and what they wear to achieve the preferred impression (Goffman, 1978). Self-presentation is now widely studied in social psychology. Leary (1996) distinguished three underlying motivations for

managing our self-presentation, which need not be mutually exclusive: economic or social gains, self-esteem, and identity maintenance.

Goffman distinguished between front-stage and back-stage behavior. Front-stage behavior can be considered a more public performance in which the actor's public image is on display, tightly constrained by norms and conventions.

However, these front-stage "public rule-dictated images are often contradicted" when an actor retreats back-stage (Leary, 1996, p. 87), out of the audience's view, perhaps alone or surrounded only by fellow actors. While back-stage, actors do not have to worry about the constraints of public expectation, so they may use substandard language, swear, or make sexual remarks (Goffman, 1978; Turner & Edgley, 1990). Cahill et al. (1985) found that teams of various sorts utilize the back-stage region to strategize about their collective front-stage performance. Politicians strategize privately in secluded rooms before taking the stand at a press conference (Fennema, 1997; Wodak, 2014). Goffman (1978, chap. 3) described this as "regions behavior," in which people behave differently depending on what region (or stage area) they are in.

Traditional politicians have defended the demarcation between front-stage and back-stage performance, whether the latter category refers to intra-party discussions or their own private lives (Kuhn, 2004). However, in recent years, studies have found a greater need for candidates to engage in personalization during campaigns, such as by revealing aspects of their private lives (Druckman, 2003; Kleinnijenhuis, Maurer, Kepplinger, & Oegema, 2001; Kruikemeier et al., 2013). As politicians present themselves through social media, this form of

communication challenges the separation between the back and front stages, as such technologies are known to collapse contexts.

Self-Presentation in the Presence of Context Collapse

On Twitter, as with other forms of social media, people self-present to a “networked audience” that “consists of real and potential viewers for digital content that exist within a larger social graph” (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 129). Such networked audiences will contain subsets of different audiences. For politicians, these include general supporters, supporters of the opposition, colleagues, friends, and family. Such audience subsets have been found to problematize an individual’s online self-presentation, as these audiences hold different and sometimes conflicting expectations regarding what they deem a desirable image projection (Marder et al, 2012). This situation is referred to as context collapse (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), conflicting social spheres (Binder et al., 2009) or the online multiple audience problem (Marder et al., 2012).

Marwick and Boyd (2011) carried out a qualitative inquiry into the strategies adopted by micro-celebrities (i.e., people with 100,000 or more followers) who were faced with the issue of context collapse when using Twitter. Micro-celebrities communicate on social media to promote themselves and heighten their popularity (Senft, 2008, p. 25). Politicians are similar to micro-celebrities in that they also wish to increase their own popularity and that of their parties. Marwick and Boyd (2011, p. 126) described two core strategies for micro-celebrities: self-censorship and balancing. Self-censorship means that the individual censors the content considered for tweeting so that it is suitable for all

imagined audiences; that is, their self-presentation takes on a “lowest common denominator” aspect, conforming to even the strictest standards making it suitable for even the most strict standards (p. 126). Marder et al. (2016) found, however, that audience standards are not the only factor motivating self-censorship; it is also a function of the audience’s value and its ability to provide economic or social gains and losses for the communicator.

In Marwick and Boyd’s (2011) second strategy, individuals balance their presentation of front-stage and back-stage aspects in their tweets, due to their recognition of the differing preferences of their audience members. Marwick and Boyd indicated that this balancing could occur within a single tweet or by alternating between tweets. The question of the effectiveness of this balancing strategy has been largely neglected in the research literature. Existing studies have generally addressed social media posts by users as either being private or professional rather than hybrid (van Zoonen, Verhoeven, & Vliegenthart, 2016). However, Kim and Song (2016), who conducted a cross-sectional survey of undergraduates who followed celebrities on Twitter, found that those celebrities who shared aspects of their personal life had improved social presence and thus better perceived connectivity with fans. The present research will further examine the balancing strategy in the context of politicians using Twitter.

Self-Presentation of Politicians on Twitter

Twitter is now a crucial technology for political parties and their politicians to communicate with electorates (Park, 2013; Yu, 2016). Engaging people on Twitter has been associated with increased support for candidates (Kruikemeier,

2014; Lee & Shin, 2012; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). However, little is known about the impact of what is actually tweeted, particularly with regard to the presentation of aspects of politicians' professional or private lives. Lee and Oh (2012), in a study using a Japanese sample, found that revealing aspects of a politician's private life increased message recognition and recall but had an ambiguous effect on intention to vote, as the latter factor was complicated by confounding factors such as the individual's degree of social activeness. Kruikemeier (2014) used a large content analysis of tweets to predict voting figures, finding that revealing personal features such as one's emotions or private life had "surprisingly" no impact on the number of votes (p. 135). As an explanation of this result, she posited that since tweets come from people's personal accounts, all tweets may have been considered somewhat personal. Given the inconclusiveness of the results, the authors of both prior studies called for future experimental work to ascertain whether the impact of politicians' presentation of their personal life affects voting intentions (Kruikemeier, p. 137; see also Lee & Oh, 2012).

Responding to these calls, this paper aims to test the impact of politicians' use of a within-tweet balancing strategy (i.e., mixing professional and private presentation within each tweet) versus front-stage-only (strictly professional) presentation. In doing so, we seek to contribute valuable knowledge on the self-presentation of politicians on Twitter. Moreover, we contribute more broadly to knowledge regarding self-presentation in the face of context collapse by providing the first empirical test of the balancing strategy. Unlike previous work in this area, we adopt a longitudinal approach, for two reasons: first because self-

disclosures are mutually reinforcing over time (Trepte & Reinecke, 2013), and second because relationships with brands are not built in a day (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009). Furthermore, our focus is on outcomes at the party level rather than for the individual politician. We chose this level of analysis first, because voting for parties within a party-list proportional representation is the “most common type of electoral system employed in democracies” (Bormann & Golder, 2013, p. 365). Second, this provides an alternative perspective to the previous research in this area, which focused on candidate-level effects (Lee & Oh, 2012; Kruikemeier et al., 2013). Third, we envisage party-focused evidence to be of greater need in informing party level social media policy documents for use with member politicians. Parties acknowledge the importance of this issue that guidance is needed for politicians engaging the electorate (Mason, 2015).

We test the effect of a balancing strategy upon two constructs: *interest in the political party* and *intention to vote for the political party*. The rationale for measuring intention to vote for the political party is straightforward, as getting votes is the end goal of political campaigning. This variable was examined by previous research in the field (Papagiannidis, Coursaris, & Bourlakis, 2012; Park & Yang, 2012), and its selection is fairly obvious. In contrast, the decision to measure interest in the political party marks a deviation from tradition, as attitude is a more typical dependent variable for the outcome of communication. However, Machleit, Allen, and Madden (1993) established brand interest as a distinct and highly relevant dependent variable when investigating mature brands. They concluded that for mature brands (which would include most political parties as they are typically quite old), one’s attitude is rather

established. Consequently, the authors argue that brand interest, a related but separate construct measuring the “base level of approachability, inquisitiveness, openness, or curiosity an individual has about a brand” (p. 73), has greater efficacy in measuring the outcomes of communications for such brands compared to examining attitude. Therefore, interest in the party was chosen rather than attitude toward the party. Furthermore, whether the followers liked the communication is considered as a mediator in the possible relationships above and is the subject of our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis Development

We propose that the use of a within-tweet balancing strategy (a mix of professional and private presentation) as opposed to a purely front-stage, strictly professional presentation will lead followers on Twitter to like the communication more. Anecdotal evidence supports this notion. *Public Relations Tactics* magazine has recommended using a more personal tone on Twitter to get individuals to like one’s communication. In addition, previous work has demonstrated that voters expect to know some details of a politician’s personal life (Langer, 2010) and have difficulties trusting politicians who do not share such details (Brooks, 2016). A front-stage-only style of communication would thus create an expectation gap between what followers expect to see and what they do see. Such a gap has been demonstrated to reduce liking and satisfaction in a service setting (Sheth & Mittal, 1996), and we expect that the same logic will apply in a communication setting. We therefore hypothesize as follows:

H1. Voters exposed to a within-tweet balancing strategy from a politician on Twitter will like the communication more than voters exposed to a front-stage-only strategy.

If a within-tweet balancing strategy indeed creates greater liking of the communication, this should also lead to an increased interest in the political party and an increased intention to vote for the political party. Liking is believed to be an influential human emotion that motivates the development of relationships with other persons or brands (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Ye & Van Raaij, 2004). As such, the construct of liking has previously been found to mediate the success of marketing communications and desired outcomes such as box office sales (Boksem & Smidts, 2015) and increased stakeholder trust (Nicholson, Compeau, & Sethi, 2001). We predict that a similar effect will emerge in political communication. Hence, an increased interest in the political party or in intention to vote should result from following a Twitter feed if the follower appreciates the content. We hypothesize accordingly:

H2. Voters exposed to a within-tweet balancing strategy from a politician on Twitter will be more interested in the political party than voters exposed to a front-stage-only strategy.

H3. Voters exposed to a within-tweet balancing strategy from a politician on Twitter will have a greater intention to vote for the political party than voters exposed to a front-stage-only strategy.

We also propose, based on prior research, that how much a follower likes the communication will mediate the efficacy of the Twitter presentational strategy and the outcome variables in H2 and H3 (see Boksem & Smidts, 2015; Nicholson et al., 2001). Hence we add this pair of hypotheses:

H4a. Whether one likes the communication resulting from a within-tweet balancing strategy will mediate the positive effect found on interest in the political party.

H4b. Whether one likes the communication resulting from a within-tweet balancing strategy will mediate the positive effect found on the intention to vote for the political party.

Method

Participants

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an experimental study over five days with 288 subjects, who were recruited through an online web panel of a professional market research company based in Sweden. The sample was 57% male, with a mean age of 40 years ($SD = 15.5$). The respondents were a nationally representative sample of eligible voters in Sweden. The reward for our respondents' participation was points valued equivalent to 6 USD that could be received as either money or redeemed for products.

Stimulus Development

Fictitious Twitter accounts of parliamentary politicians in Sweden were created. This setup gave us total control of the Twitter communication and ensured that the causal conclusions regarding the effect of a balanced versus a front-stage-only presentation strategy would be warranted. To create suitable stimulus tweets, the research team studied the feeds of 30 well-known European politicians. The investigator triangulation method (Denzin, 1973) was adopted. Team members individually coded tweets for different politicians into the different self-presentation strategies. Where the specific strategy was uncertain this was discussed with at least one other member of the team and a consensus reached. It was agreed that most of the tweets examined were largely professional in nature (approx. 75%), with some maintaining a balancing strategy (approx. 20%). However, very few were strictly related to the politician's private life (approx. less than 5%).

Using this background research as a guide, we created different lists of tweets for two experimental groups. Group 1 (front-stage-only) was exposed to tweets containing no details of the politician's private life, such as "Today, we will discuss the budget for the Department of Defense." Group 2 (balanced) was exposed to the same tweets, but with the addition of a detail from the politician's private life in each tweet, e.g., "After having a hearty breakfast today, we will discuss the budget for the Department of Defense." These personal details varied in each tweet (please see appendix 1 for more examples.) Due to this manipulation, the tweets provided to group 2 inherently used more characters than those for group 1; however, this difference is not believed to confound interpretation of the tweets, as prior work has found no relationship between

tweet length and interpersonal influence (Lahuerta-Otero & Cordero-Gutiérrez, 2016).

As we wanted to control for gender effects of the politician as a covariate, groups 1 and 2 were further subdivided into two segments each, featuring politicians of different genders. Thus, half the members in each experimental group followed a male politician and the other half a female politician although all members of group1 (2) received identical front-stage-only (balanced) tweets. The accounts provided to both groups 1 and 2 contained identical short descriptions of the respective politicians as well as identical photos (only amended to match the gender of the politicians). The descriptions stated the names of the politicians and that they were members of parliament in the country where the participants resided. To avoid the risk of confounding factors associated with the politician's political party, no party affiliations were indicated, even though we recognized that this removal could slightly decrease the ecological validity of the study. The list of tweets also reflected this decision, as general details about parliamentary life and issues that concern parties across the ideological spectrum were used, rather than any statements that might cause participants to associate the fictitious politician with an actual political party.

Manipulation Check

After completing the lists of tweets, we administered a pretest to 31 respondents who rated how personal they found the tweets from both groups on a 10-point scale (from *not at all personal* to *very personal*). A paired sample t test showed that the mean of 7.13 for the tweets revealing details of the politician's personal

life was significantly greater than the mean of 3.75 for the professional tweets ($t = 4.10, p < .001$). Within this pretest, participants were also asked to indicate the likelihood that the list of tweets came from a parliamentarian in the country of study, as a check for ecological validity. Responses were given on a 10-point Likert scale (*not at all likely* to *very likely*). A one-sample t -test revealed that the mean of 7.19 was significantly higher than the average possible score of 5.5 ($t = 5.24, p < .001$), thus proving that the tweets in our study were deemed likely to be used by real politicians. A paired sample t test of this variable furthermore revealed that this likelihood was not significantly different between the two experimental groups ($t = -.137, p = .892$).

Procedure

Recruitment took place seven days prior to the start of the study. To take part in the study, the participants had to possess or acquire a Twitter account.

Participants agreed to follow a politician's Twitter account for five consecutive days (Monday to Friday) and then answer a survey distributed on the afternoon of day five. They then received an email with a link randomly assigning them to one of the study's four experimental Twitter accounts that they were to follow.

Participants received tweets posted from that experimental account three times daily for five days (which, after investigating various political twitters in order to develop the stimuli, we determined was consistent with what is commonly an active tweeting rate). To confirm that the participants were actually exposed to the tweets during the experiment, they were instructed to write one tweet per day themselves or to "like" one of the politician's tweets. We checked daily to

verify that this prescribed activity had occurred. During the five days, 23 of the 288 participants were removed from the dataset because they failed to follow the instructions, leaving 265 participants in the study. There were no significant differences in age ($F = .883, p = .53$) or gender ($\chi^2 = 5.93, p = .58$) between our experimental groups.

Measures

All items were measured on 10-point Likert scales (1 = *completely disagree*; 10 = *completely agree*). Interest in the political party was measured using two items: “I think that [X’s] party seems interesting” and “I would like to learn more about [X’s] party.” A mean of the two answers was calculated to form an index ($r = .77$). Intention to vote for the political party was measured with a single item: “I could consider voting for [X’s] party.” Liking the communication was likewise measured with a single item: “I like the way [X] communicates on Twitter.” In addition to the hypothesized variables, we measured two possible covariates: frequency of social media usage (measured by the single item “I use social media frequently”) and political interest (measured by the single item (“I am politically interested”).

We fully appreciate that it could be considered controversial to use single item-measures, but we nevertheless decided to do so. Supporting this decision were the findings of Bergkvist and Rossiter (2007), who demonstrated that the predictive validity of single-item measures is often no different from that of multi-item measures. To further ensure validity, we pretested these items for ambiguity to determine if they were understood equivocally, such that “there

[was] no need for multiple item measures” (Alexandrov, 2010, p. 1). This pretest was conducted in two stages. In the first stage we let fellow researchers who were not part of the study determine whether the measures needed revising in any way. Upon learning that they did not we nevertheless conducted a small focus group with uninitiated individuals in order to see if the measures were understood as intended. Again, the results at the second stage indicated that they were. Thus, we feel confident in the reliability of our results.

Results

In order to test H1, 2 and 3, we employed ANCOVA analysis in order to test the means of our test variables as well as the effect size of our independent variable while at the same time controlling for the effects of our covariates.

To test H1, which predicted that a within-tweet balancing strategy by a politician on Twitter would lead to greater liking of the communication, we compared the mean scores on liking the communication between the two experimental groups. The difference between the group exposed to a within-tweet balancing strategy ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 2.53$, $N = 131$) and the group exposed to a front-stage-only strategy ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 2.62$, $N = 134$) was statistically significant ($p < .01$; see Table 1). The partial Eta Squared was .027. None of the covariates proved significant in the analysis. Hence, H1 was supported.

To test H2, predicting that a within-tweet balancing strategy by a politician on Twitter would lead to a higher level of interest in the political party, we again

compared the means between experimental groups. The difference between the group exposed to a within-tweet balancing strategy ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 2.11$, $N = 131$) and the group exposed to a front-stage-only strategy ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 2.30$, $N = 134$) was statistically significant ($p < .05$; see Table 1). The partial Eta Squared was .017. None of the covariates proved significant in the analysis. Thus, H2 was supported.

With regard to H3, which stated that a within-tweet balancing strategy by a politician on Twitter would lead to a greater intention to vote for the political party, the difference in means between the group exposed to a within-tweet balancing strategy ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 2.33$, $N = 131$) and the group exposed to a front-stage-only strategy ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 2.16$, $N = 134$) was statistically significant ($p < .05$; see Table 1). The partial Eta Squared was .025. None of the covariates proved significant in the analysis. Hence, H3 was supported.

Table 1 about here

H4a and H4b predicted, respectively, that whether one liked the communication received from a politician's within-tweet balancing strategy on Twitter would mediate the positive effects on interest in the political party and intention to vote for the political party. To test these hypotheses, we used Preacher and Hayes's (2008) model of bootstrapped mediation. This model is well supported within the field (cf. Kim & Park, 2011). The independent variable was a dummy variable representing the experimental group (0 = front-stage-only group, 1 = balancing strategy group). The Preacher and Hayes (2008) model assesses the effect of an

indirect path (denoted ab) through a bootstrapped confidence interval. The path is deemed significant by the upper and lower confidence intervals not including zero. For mediation to exist, the only necessary condition is a significant path ab (see also Zhao, Lynch Jr., & Chen, 2010).

Two mediations were tested, one for each dependent variable (see Figures 1 and 2). Bootstrap resampling was set at 5,000. The five covariates of concern were included in each model, namely, gender of the politician and respondents' degree of social media use, political interest, age, and gender. Results are shown in Figures 1 and 2. For both interest in the political party and intention to vote for the political party, indirect-only mediations were established, meaning that the relationships between our independent and dependent variables were fully mediated by liking. Thus, when exposed to a within-tweet balancing strategy, voters felt more interest in the political party and had a greater intention to vote for the politician's party, a relationship that was mediated by whether they liked the communication. Thus, H4a and H4b were supported. None of the covariates were significant at any stage of any of the two models ($p > .05$).

Figures 1 and 2 about here

Discussion

From the standpoint of the political party, our findings support encouraging the party's politicians to use a balancing strategy to engage followers through Twitter. This result supports prior studies that have found electorates to respond better to more personalized communication by politicians (Druckman,

2003; Kruikemeier et al., 2013). Specifically, we find that tweets combining professional and private references increase interest in the politician's party and intention to vote for the party, when compared to tweets containing professional content only. These relationships were fully mediated by whether the respondent liked the communication. This supports the necessity of causing recipients to like marketing communications in order to attain positive outcomes, as found by prior studies (Boksem & Smidts, 2015; Chintagunta 2010; Nicholson et al., 2001). In other words, our results show that a balanced strategy is preferred by Twitter users over a front-stage-only one.

Our results shed further light on Kruikemeier's (2014) finding that the amount of tweets that included personal aspects (i.e., reference to emotions or private life) had, by her own admission, "surprisingly" no significant association with the number of votes received (p. 135). We propose that this may be because Kruikemeier (2014) treated occurrences of back-stage expressions separately from front-stage communications. Our study highlights the necessity for both politicians who tweet and researchers to consider the distinct impact of hybrid, balanced tweets. We also extend Lee and Oh's (2012) finding that irrespective of the level of political interest, the degree of social media usage, or the gender of the politicians or followers, a balanced strategy in which politicians reveal aspects of their private lives is superior to appearing strictly professional.

Implications and Conclusion

Our research makes two core contributions with several implications. First, we contribute to understanding of the self-presentation of politicians through

Twitter. Specifically, we show within the constraints of our experiment that political parties may attract greater interest and voting intention from their electorate if their politicians provide a balanced self-presentational strategy, opposed to a front-stage-only approach. Currently, political parties spend a sizable portion of their marketing budget on social media, particularly in acquiring followers and, in the case of Facebook, page “likes” (Hawthorne, 2015; Marder et al., 2016). However, we propose that their resources could be better allocated in the short term to maximizing current engagement with their existing followers, with subsequent effects on future followers.

To increase interest in the party and intention to vote, political party campaign managers should focus on providing guidance about the balancing strategy. Guidelines and seminars could be provided to member politicians, explaining how to undertake a balancing strategy. Given the present findings, this guidance should include recognition of the value of revealing aspects of one’s private life within professionally oriented tweets. Furthermore, we offer a suggestion for site designers to help them increase the ability of public figures to engage their followers successfully with appealing content, thus benefiting the social media platform overall. Specifically, they should reconsider the “prompt” phrase used in the tweet/post box for users who are “verified” (i.e., micro-celebrities with large followings), to encourage tweets of a balanced nature.

In addition, we highlight the vital role of whether one likes a communication in mediating the effect of self-presentation content on the attainment of positive outcomes. Specifically, our results show that followers like tweets more if the

message reveals aspects of a politician's private life. Researchers examining the impact of user-generated content should consider this construct of whether one likes the communication as a mediating factor. Furthermore, in providing guidance on the use of social media, political managers need to promote the need for likable content. They may wish to conduct internal audits of their politicians' current tweets or conduct research on the electorate's perceptions to better understand what content is most likable in relation to politicians' private or professional lives. Furthermore, insight can be obtained from existing research on how to get the most from brand social media communications in order to increase liking (Malhotra, Malhotra, & See, 2012, 2013).

Second, we contribute more broadly to enhancing prior knowledge regarding self-presentation through social media in the face of context collapse by providing the first empirical test of a balancing strategy (Marder et al., 2012; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Beyond the context of politics, both micro-celebrities and general users who communicate with diverse audiences through social media should consider adopting a balancing strategy to maximize the benefits of their network. Our studies suggest that the balancing strategy provides an alternative and more positive approach to online impression management, as opposed to a rather defensive self-censorship tactic (Marder et al., 2016a).

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several strengths, including its longitudinal approach in which stimulus materials arrived naturally within Twitter news feeds. Furthermore, it employed the well-established theoretical lens of self-presentation to examine

an important phenomenon of interest to political parties, researchers, and platform designers. However, the study does have some limitations. First, although we made efforts to increase ecological validity (e.g. through a longitudinal design administered through the interface), akin with most experiments our study was limited due to the inability to test real-life phenomenon. We propose there are many real-world factors that may challenge our findings these include pre-existing attitudes of the politician or party, the time until election day and the specific sentiment of the back-stage component of the Tweets. For example, our controlled experimental findings must be taken with a pinch of salt when considering the impact of Trump in the lead up to the 2016 Presidential election, who was widely discussed to have been tweeting in an unprofessional manner about professional matters. Due to the limited ecological validity of our study we call for further research to validate or challenge our findings carried out on the existing twitter activity of real-life politicians. Specifically, studies should code existing tweets for the self-presentational strategies theorized here and ascertain their impact through examining engagement statistics (e.g. no. retweets, replies) and analyze the sentiment within these interactions.

Second, we examined only the efficacy of a within-tweet balancing strategy; future studies should examine and contrast experimentally the use of within-tweet and between-tweet balancing strategies. Third, we did not provide a control condition of back-stage-only tweets. This omission was driven by our preliminary content analysis of politicians' tweets, which found that they almost invariably contained a professional element, and our own resource restrictions

associated with the longitudinal design. Though the comparison conducted here between front-stage-only and balanced self-presentation provides a useful contribution to theory and practice, through being the first test for Marwick and Boyds (2011) theorized strategy and shedding light on a real-life issue for politicians. Future research should control for back-stage-only tweets to extend and validate our findings.

Fourth, our study used hypothetical politicians and parties, thus controlling for previously formed attitudes that participants may have had toward known entities. Though this aspect of our method was advantageous for internal validity, it reduces ecological validity in order to avoid the possible complexities noted by Lee and Oh (2012), who used real parties in their research. Additional studies should replicate our study design with references to real political entities to understand the impact of this potentially confounding factor.

Fourth, although we had good reasons for examining the dependent variables at the party level, the effects of a balanced strategy may differ at the level of the individual politician. Finally, the generalizability of the study is limited to a western European context, and therefore caution must be practiced when extrapolating the findings beyond this region, or to countries that do not have party-list electoral systems. Future studies should examine balancing strategies in other countries with different types of electoral systems.

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Table 1

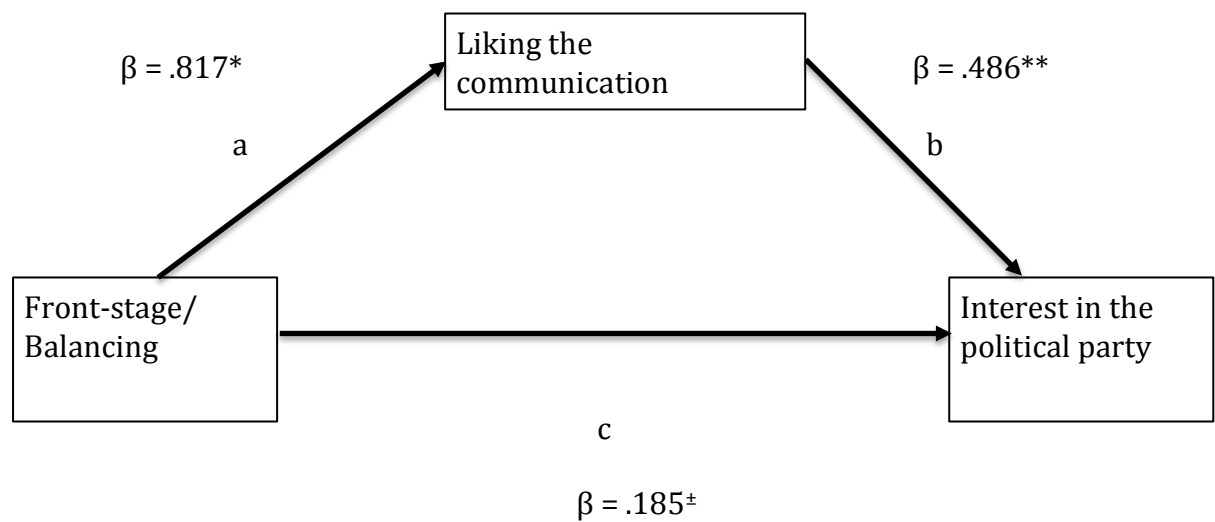
Variable	1. Mean within-tweet balancing strategy (N = 134)	2. Mean front-stage- only strategy (N = 131)	P<
Liking the communication	4.04	4.84	.01
Interest in the political party	4.87	5.46	.05
Intention to vote for the political party	4.12	4.82	.05

Figure 1

$B_{ab} = .356$

Lower Limit of Confidence Interval = .099

Upper Limit of Confidence Interval = .713



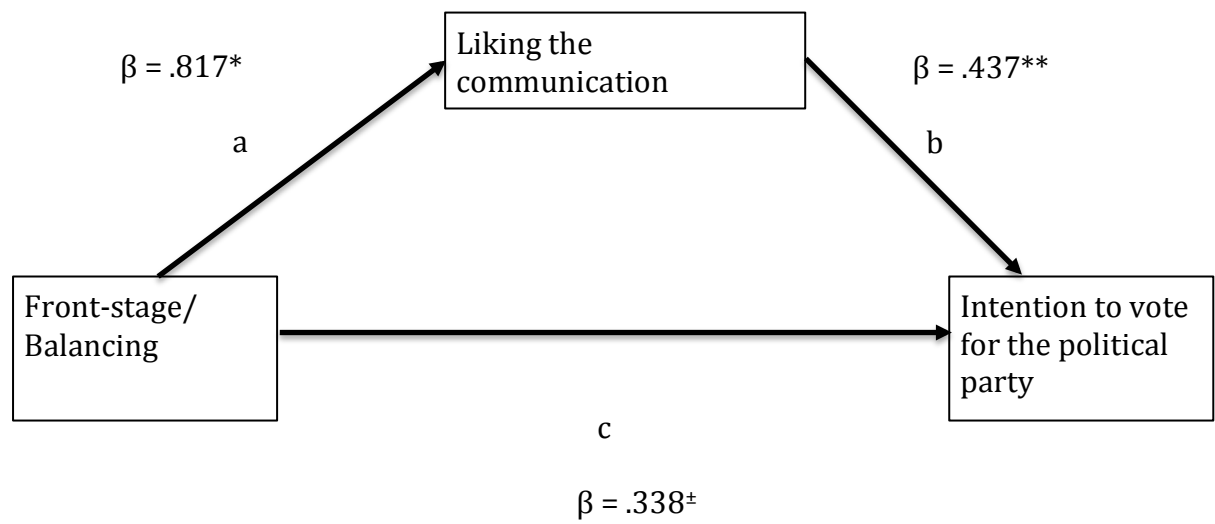
$^\pm$ n.s; $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$

Figure 2

$B_{ab} = .397$

Lower Limit of Confidence Interval = .085

Upper Limit of Confidence Interval = .663



$^\pm$ n.s.; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Appendix 1: Examples of tweets used in the study (translated from Swedish by the authors)

Front-stage-only tweets

On my way to a debate on school policy.

Just had lunch with a group of ninth-graders visiting parliament.

Just finished an op-ed piece on the nations budgeting process.

At a ribbon-cutting ceremony of the new and improved rail link between Trelleborg and Malmö.

Visiting the local Gothenburg chapter of the party on my way back from Skåne.

Balanced strategy tweets

On my way to a debate on school policy after dropping the kids off at day care.

Just had lunch with a group of ninth-graders visiting parliament. They remind me of myself at that age.

Just finished an op-ed piece on the nations budgeting process. Hitting the running trail shortly.

Left home early this morning. Now at a ribbon-cutting ceremony of the new and improved rail link between Trelleborg and Malmö.

Visiting the local Gothenburg chapter of the party on my way back from Skåne. Ran into an old friend from my time in the party youth organization.